

Congregation, have you ever asked yourself what it actually means to be free in Christ? I am not asking what it means to be a Christian. You ask a Sunday school child or a Catechism student and they will tell you that a Christian is someone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. They will tell you that Jesus died for sinners and that he rose from the dead. And if they are really switched on they will even say that through Christ's death and resurrection he has won eternal life for all those who would believe in him. And we all would say verily, verily, and amen to that. But the question I am asking has more to do with the essence of being a Christian.

I suggest that is what Paul is speaking about in verse 1 of chapter 5. Paul seems like he is starting a new section in this book by reminding the Galatian Christians that it is for freedom that Christ has set them free. In Chapter 4:21-31; Paul was teaching us that if we depend on the law to save us or add our works or affiliations to the gospel, then we are children of Hagar. We are all Ishmaelite's and have no inheritance. But Christ has set us free from that, through his death and resurrection and in Him therefore we are free indeed. We are children of the free woman Sarah.

We are children that have been promised a wonderful inheritance. We are now people who no longer bound by the yoke of slavery to the law. Before Christ's death and resurrection, before our conversion, we were bound by the devil for our failure to be fully obedient to God's law. We were constantly weighed down by our sin before a holy God. We were weighed down by having to live every day under Adam's curse for our sin, namely death and eternal punishment. But now, thankfully, because of God's great mercy and grace, we no longer need to live under that fear. We are free.

The writer to Hebrews reminds us, that God gave us Jesus "so that by his death he might destroy him one holds the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:14b-15). The glorious gospel of free grace in Jesus Christ has set us free! Praise God. Sin, death and the devil no longer have power over us for our wonderful Saviour has conquered sin, death, and the devil. He has freed us from the law's deadly curse against my sin by keeping the law I could not keep, paying the penalty I could not pay, and winning the victory I could never win.

Now that freedom we have in Christ is so rich, so wonderful, so liberating, it's worth guarding. The Galatian Christians were free in Christ, but were in danger of going back into slavery. Hence the need for Paul's warning: "Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1b). In the original language it has the force of a command. Stand firm, hold on, don't let yourselves be moved! There is an ever present danger for Christians, as it was in the Church of Galatia, is that we no longer think what Christ has done for us through his death and resurrection, is sufficient to save us to eternal life.

The apostle's concern was that the Galatians were about to give up their freedom in Christ and become children of Hagar again, or if you like, become Ishmaelites again. Paul's concern when he mentions "a yoke of slavery" was that the Galatian Christians would consider their obedience to the OT law as a means of justification. The first-century Judaism did not believe in grace alone, but in grace plus the keeping of the law. It was sometimes referred to as the "the yoke of the commandments," or even "the yoke of the kingdom of heaven."

The irony is that the Judaizers did not recognize that they were enslaved by the law. Peter saw it. In Acts 15:10, during the Jerusalem Council, he said that the "law was a yoke was something that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." Paul is concerned that the Galatians had been yoked again to the law and had become beasts of burden. The Judaizers, the Jewish-Christian legalists were responsible for they wanted to add the law of Moses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In particular, the Judaizers were insisting that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised, mentioned in both v2 and v3.

When we were on the farm we said that the only good snake was a dead snake. According to the Judaizers, the only good Christian was a circumcised Christian. But then you might as well be dead! You can never be justified as righteous before a holy God to whom you need to give an account of every thought and every word spoken through your obedience to the law! You can't do it! Not circumcision nor anything else can make your right in God's sight. If circumcision became mandatory for all Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, then salvation would be based on a work rather than on God's free grace.

More than that, we would have to keep the whole law and our freedom would be gone! We would be Ishmaels, all over again. F. F. Bruce puts it very succinctly. "The Galatian Christians could seek justification through faith in Christ (and obtain

it) or they could seek it through legal works (and miss it).” Circumcision was a way of saying that Jesus Christ was not enough for the Galatians, that they needed something more. There are really only two modes of justification. Becoming circumcised is one way, which means obedience to the whole law all of the time, or alternatively, faith in Christ alone. Oh, if only Christians would see the hopelessness of the first and their inability to be able to do it, and the beauty of the freedom that Christ has provide through his death and resurrection, but so many don’t.

The Judaizers added their circumcision and feast days and dietary laws. Today, some people base their standing before God on the work they do in the church, or on the quality or frequency of their personal devotions. Others seek to justify themselves by the fact that they are baptized or have their children baptised and have done profession of faith or to what denomination they belong to. But again, if we try to be justified before God by anything we do, no matter how small it is, we are not free. This is why justification must come by faith alone. In fact, works for salvation are fatal and Paul warns them about going down this dangerous road by mentioned three things for them to consider.

First, if you think works can assist your salvation, then Jesus Christ can no longer do you any good. The apostle could hardly be more emphatic in v2: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value (or advantage) to you” (Gal. 5:2 cf 2:21). Trying to get right with God by getting circumcised or by doing anything else makes Christ utterly superfluous. If Christians think they can keep the law as a way of forgiveness and salvation, then we don’t need a Saviour. Jesus becomes completely unnecessary for us.

Justification is either by law or by grace, either by works or by faith alone. With Christ, it is all or nothing. If we will not allow Christ to do everything for us, he can do nothing for us. When the Judaizers told the Galatians that they had to get circumcised they were saying that Moses had to finish what Christ could only begin.

Allow me to illustrate. There was a man who had a Sherrin football signed by none other than Ron Barrassi. Now Ron Barrassi was a rather well known footballer and coach. This man decided to sell this football on Ebay. But he was a little worried that people wouldn’t be able to see Barassi’s signature, for it had faded. So, he carefully got out a felt tip pen and traced over the signature so that it would be more prominent and easily seen. However, by doing this he made the football worthless.

It is the same with Jesus Christ. His finished work cannot be refinished or added to or touched up. It can only be destroyed. If we try to add our works to his work, then his work no longer does us any good. So stand firm, hold on to the freedom you have in Christ! Don’t let yourselves be moved!

Now if you are still tempted to a works salvation through the law, there is a second thing to consider. Note v3 “I declare to every man who let’s himself be circumcised is obliged to obey the whole law.” Not only are we unable to profit from Christ, but God’s law demands we would need to keep the entire old covenant law from beginning to end. Paul has said earlier in Ch 3:10, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to everything written in the Book of the Law.” Keeping the whole law is a thankless task. A little like the horse tethered to an exercise rotunda – just keep walking or working at it. You can never stop.

Well, the needle is stuck in the groove. Not only can we not keep God’s whole law, the yoke of the law is unbearable. We are forever in its debt, slaves all over gain. So let me say it again. Stand firm, hold on to the freedom you have in Christ! Don’t let yourselves be moved!

Should you still be tempted to a works salvation through the law, there is a third thing to consider mentioned in verse 4. “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated (severed – cut off) from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:4). Just as the knife was used in the act of circumcision, so also we would be cut off from Christ if we went down the road of ‘works salvation.’ Jesus Christ becomes a stranger to us; we lose access to his grace. It’s a serious matter. Anyone who rejects the only salvation that Christ has to offer has no business belonging to the church any longer. That doesn’t mean they are entirely lost, for there is always room for repentance and they will repent if they are truly a child of God in Christ.

So let me say it again. Stand firm, hold fast congregation, don’t be moved. Don’t let anyone rob you of the freedom you have in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, “if the Son has set you free you are free indeed” (Jn 8:36). We are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Works don’t matter, in fact, faith is all that counts in the end. The way that we become righteous in God’s sight (that is to say, the way that we are justified) is by faith alone. And we receive that righteousness by faith and it is real, here and now and gives us great comfort.

However, there is also a future aspect to this. We look forward to the day when we will appear before the Judgment seat. We too will all be asked, "Why should I let you into heaven?" Please, please don't say because you have been circumcised or because you have worked in the church as an office bearer or deacon or deaconess. Please don't say because you were baptised and did profession of faith. Please don't say because you were a member of the reformed church. If you trust in any of those things, you will be found guilty and asked to depart from God's presence, because it is all tainted with sin.

The only way you will hear that final verdict of "Not guilty, welcome" is because you have placed your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and his completed work for your salvation!

Now this kind of faith comes only from the Holy Spirit, which is why Paul speaks of waiting "through the Spirit" in v5. He is the one who gives the gift of faith. Whether you are circumcised or not, doesn't matter. It has no value (v6a). It was really a shocking thing to say to the Judaizers. How dare Paul say that circumcision doesn't matter? Because in Christ, circumcision becomes irrelevant.

Both the circumcised (Jews) and the uncircumcised (Gentiles) are one in Christ if they place their faith in Him. And once we are in Christ, we have everything we need. Note v6b. "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). Paul is with James. The faith that alone justifies is never alone. True faith is a faith that works and expresses itself in love, both towards God and man.

The faith that can produce such love is the only thing that really matters. Yes, we need to work and we need to do missions and we need to read the Scriptures and we need to be people of prayer. But it would all mean nothing if it isn't driven by our love for Christ. And that love for Christ is only possible because as 1 Jn 4:19 "...He first loved us." So stand firm, hold on, don't be moved from the freedom you have in Christ to love. If you allow yourselves to be shackled all over again to the yoke of slavery, then you have not only lost Christ, you have lost your salvation.

Congregation don't ever let that happen. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, hold on, don't be moved from that wonderful freedom. Amen!